

GVN CONCEPTS OF RURAL CONSTRUCTION

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[This paper attempts only to express premises and ideas -- not always explicit in GVN official documents -- that form an underlying rationale of current GVN planning for rural construction: in particular for the "securing" phase. It does not provide a critique of this approach; nor discuss all the factors that bear on the adequacy and probable effectiveness of current programs; nor consider alternative approaches.]

Goals and Challenge

In a recent address, Prime Minister Ky described the aims of the rural construction process as succinctly as they have every been stated:

"Our viewpoint is not only to root out the Viet Cong from the rural areas but also to root ourselves in the rural areas and this not only for some time, but forever."¹

To liberate the rural areas from Communist domination, by isolating and destroying the influence of the Communist political apparatus along with its guerrilla/terrorist backing; to restore public security, law and order; to extend the effective authority of the GVN; to create a social order of security, freedom, social justice and economic improvement that the rural people themselves will willingly and vigorously defend against Communist attempts at disruption: these are all goals of rural construction.

They can be achieved only by a process in which the people come to participate actively, along with the military, police and officials. The people must come to engage willingly in their own self-defense, self-help and self-government, in ways that isolate the Communists and make the people steadily less vulnerable to the Communist threats or appeals.

Winning this participation in turn demands new attitudes, competence and political awareness from the representatives of government -- soldiers, cadre, police and officials -- and a new relationship between the Government of Vietnam and its people: a relationship of mutual confidence and understanding, communication, mutual responsibility and support. It demands local government that comes from, thinks like, and is responsive to the majority of the population. And it demands the promise, steadily being fulfilled, of a new and better society.

These are ambitious aims. Such changes, carried to their end, would amount at the same time to military victory, political transformation and social revolution: and no one of these can be achieved in a major way without the other two. (Fortunately, they need not be achieved everywhere at once, nor does major progress demand full success in any one direction.)

As Prime Minister Ky has stated in a more recent speech, the non-military goals are ends in themselves:

"The war for the hearts of the people is more than a military tactic. It is a moral principle. For this we are trying to bring about a true social revolution. We are instituting a program for a better society."²

Yet if these political, economic and social changes were not at the same time essential to the winning of the internal war there would be strong argument for postponing them till the demands of the military campaign had been met. In the past, that argument has often prevailed. In Prime Minister Ky's words:

"We were deluding ourselves with the idea that our weaknesses could not be remedied while we were fighting a war. We said that once the aggressor was driven from our land we would turn to our own political and social defects.

It has taken this country a long time to realize that we will not completely drive out the aggressor until we make a start at eliminating these political and social defects. We must be indestructible, not vulnerable." 2

The foundation of current GVN thinking on rural construction is that these non-military measures are vital to success in the internal war; that military operations alone, while essential, can bring only temporary and provisional security to the countryside; that the revolutionary social and political changes are essential to achieving thorough and lasting security.

Why should this be? Why is so complex a strategy demanded?

A large part of the answer lies in the bonds of mutual support between the Communist guerrillas and the Communist political apparatus elaborately embedded among the rural people. The familiar fish-and-water-analogy tends to conceal the crucial role of this political organization. The Communist guerrilla fish does not swim in an unorganized sea of people, whose support reflects spontaneous sympathy. Support for the guerrillas -- information, shelter, food, money, recruits -- is organized by a hierarchical network of disciplined agents built up over years from local people of the area, often more stable in membership than the corresponding GVN structure. In turn, the threat of guerrilla terrorism protects this "infrastructure" of informers and sympathizers and enforces the rule of Communist officials over many rural people of South Vietnam who do not want to live under Communism. To break this rule, to shatter the organization, and to ensure that it cannot return are primary goals of the campaign against the Communists. The rural construction process - in all its military, police, political, social, economic dimensions - is designed to achieve them.

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Phases of Rural Construction

The general strategy and intent of rural construction are not new. If current plans succeed better than past programs, it will be by better implementation, guided by past experience and failures and by a better understanding of the coherence of the program in all its aspects.

The functions of rural construction overlap in time but correspond roughly to three phases: "clearing," "securing" and "development."

The "clearing" process "aims at annihilating or chasing VC military local forces and main forces from the areas expected to be reconstructed."³ Its purpose -- along with the later military operations on the periphery of the zone -- is to lift the threat of guerrilla terrorism from the people of the area for a prolonged period, long enough for the work of later phases to proceed and take effect.

Primary emphasis is on small unit activity to saturate the area over an extended period of time, using day and night patrols, raids, hamlet searches, and ambushes, with larger unit operations to exploit intelligence gathered. Earlier -- prior to rural construction proper in the given area -- and then simultaneously in neighboring areas, regular and regional forces must have weakened and disrupted Communist ability to resist militarily the clearing process by less prolonged "search and destroy" operations against Viet Cong forces. ^{1/4}

Operations in this phase are predominantly military, aimed at Communist military forces. However, National Police, accompanying the troops into the area, should play an important role in

interrogation, gathering intelligence and developing intelligence nets; while correct troop behavior and simple military civic action must (in contrast to past performance) prepare public attitudes favorably for later government activity.

Efforts at rural construction in the recent past have commonly aborted at this first stage. Occupied in static defense and in contending with the growing Communist main force threat, troops have rarely been employed in the past two years in the sustained saturation tactics essential to "clearing." The presence of Free World military forces should now make RVNAF units available for this vital mission.

The second phase, "securing," aims at producing fundamental and lasting improvements in the security of the countryside and governmental authority over it. While regular and regional forces operate on the periphery of the zone and in neighboring areas to prevent VC units from returning, and small-unit operations continue within the area, the work of this period is predominantly non-military: political, police, psychological, economic, social. The targets are the Viet Cong political agents among the people, and the rural population themselves.

There are three main tasks: First, to discover and to destroy the influence of the Communist network of informers, propagandists and officials (whose customary guerrilla back-up force -- protecting them, enforcing their influence, and in turn supported by them -- has been at least temporarily inactivated by the "clearing" process). Second, to replace Communist or ineffective authority with democratic and effective local government, responsive both to the wishes of the rural people and to national authority. Third,

to motivate and organize the people to defend themselves and to resist the return of Communist influence.

The tactics of this phase, most complex of the three, will be discussed in the next section.

The third phase, "developing," is a "nation-building" process with no foreseeable end, in which social, economic and political activities continuously strengthen and improve the effectiveness of local government, bring increasing social justice, and better the conditions of life.

Such achievements where security permits -- and this includes the cities -- are instrumental to progress in the non-secure zones undergoing "clearing" or "securing," for they demonstrate visibly to people in those areas the benefits of living in a peaceful area under the authority of the GVN. It is by GVN performance in secure areas (and similarly, by GVN treatment of "its own": its pay and support to officials and soldiers, including injured and veterans, and their dependents) that GVN promises in insecure areas will be judged. As Prime Minister Ky has frequently pointed out, the GVN has in the past commonly failed this simple test of credibility.

Winning the People: The Securing Phase

The purpose of the securing period, summarized by the GVN Directive on Rural Construction Policies, is to:

"destroy VC political and military infrastructures, and concurrently consolidate or reconstruct our infrastructures, ~~and~~ to liberate the people from Communist domination, help the people realize a sense of duty and rise up at will to preserve the restored security." 3

If anything is new in the spirit of the current GVN approach to rural construction, it is an increased understanding that the goals above cannot be reached by a mechanical process that is applied to the people or done for the people. It is essential to win the voluntary, active involvement of the rural people in their own self-defense, self-help and self government. The Directive on Rural Construction Policies emphasizes:

"Rural reconstruction is a work which the military, the people and the administrative officials must unite to accomplish. The most important and decisive factor for victory is the People. The missions of the military and administrative officials are only to help and direct the people, to motivate the people to realize the necessity and importance of rural reconstruction work, to assume this work and consider this work as that of the People, beneficial to the People and initiated by the People."3

At the same time, current plans reflect a new awareness of the difficulties of bringing about this active participation of the people, despite widespread antipathy to Communism. Their resistance to involvement reflects skepticism, apathy and fear, all rooted deep in bitter experience. These people have seen many government promises broken over the years: promises to remain, to protect them, to bring welfare benefits and social justice. They have seen Communist guerrilla presence outlast several pacification programs, many province chiefs and countless cadre. To such people, the participation that an effective rural construction program requires seems not only unrewarding but dangerous.

What is it that is demanded of them?

They must identify to local GVN officials the VC agents in their midst: the informers, the committee members, the tax collectors, recruiters, propagandists, the links to the guerrillas. They must report and resist the attempts of these agents to reenter, or even to operate "peacefully." They must pass on information about VC guerrilla movements and Communist activities. They must take active part in organizations and cooperative activities that exclude and isolate the Communists. Many of them must take up arms, train and be prepared to use them against VC intruders, while the rest prepare to cooperate in hamlet defense. Some must accept leadership posts in this continuing struggle.

Each one of these actions they take at the risk of their lives. For in taking such acts they begin visibly to choose sides; they begin to forego the relative safety of passivity and neutrality and expose themselves as active opponents of the Communists. By these acts they are committed; for they face death, if Communist guerrillas and agents should regain their strength. And no government can guarantee that the Communists will never return -- as they have, in the past -- because that depends heavily on the performance of the villager and his neighbors themselves, as well as on continued government support, which has never before been reliable.

Past "pacification" programs have failed in part because the risks seemed too great -- they were, in fact, great -- and

the rewards too small, too unlikely or distant, for the rural people to make the necessary commitment. They remained uncommitted, "neutral," doing only what they were told and that in a manner that could not stamp them as determined foes of the Communists. The programs failed, and the risks of resistance became still greater. There cannot be many more chances.

Prime Minister Ky has pointed to a fundamental defect of past efforts:

"We have had to fight external aggression from a base weakened by corruption, disappointment and mismanagement ... We were dying for a cause but we saw little evidence that that cause was worth laying down our lives for."²

If the people are now to choose the GVN side decisively, they must be shown it offers something they really believe in. Security that will still be there tomorrow. A just and honest local government they feel is theirs, that hears and acts on their needs. Greater social justice and a better life. A national government that deserves their loyal support, for which they feel they ought to accept some risk: a government represented by soldiers and police who feel and act as protectors of the people, and honest officials who feel and act as servants of the people.

The Rural Construction Cadre Group

The crucial tasks of the securing phase are thus to eliminate the VC control apparatus in the hamlets, dissolve the barriers of cynicism, indifference and apprehension left by past, failed, pacification campaigns, and to convince the people that it is

necessary and worthwhile for them to stake their lives by joining in the work of rural construction. Neither hand-outs nor government-imposed controls can do this. Nor can these tasks of persuasion, demonstration, police work and organization be carried out effectively by the sort of "cadres" generally available in the past: too often, lowly-paid, poorly trained, unmotivated functionaries from distant cities, uncoordinated, unsupervised and unarmed, afraid to stay in their assigned hamlets overnight. In effect, these frail resources reflected peacetime notions of the task of carrying on the work of government in the countryside: not the difficulties and dangers of combatting a large armed political conspiracy.

At the heart of recent planning for pacification is the concept of a new breed of cadre: adequately trained and paid, educated in the political aspects of their conduct and mission, coordinating essential specialties within a single team, armed for their own defense, working in their home districts and living in assigned hamlets day and night.

A standard Rural Reconstruction Cadre Group -- though numbers are flexible and would be tailored to local requirements -- will consist of leadership and staff (7), a People's Action Team (34), Census Grievance team (6), Civil Affairs team (6) and New Life Development team (6).⁵ The tasks of these elements are mutually supporting.^{5, 6} The group will be recruited from the district ^{which} it is to work, trained at a National Training Centers in both common subjects (including weapons handling) and specialties, and returned to the command of their District Chief and Province Chief.

The team will move into an assigned hamlet as a unit, as soon as military clearing operations have made this possible. It provides from the beginning an armed government presence remaining in and around the hamlet capable of protecting ^{itself} themselves and helping to protect the people. All cadres will have been trained in the importance of their working manner and attitude in winning the people's confidence.

In the course of living with the villagers, working with them by day and talking to them at night, the People's Action team can find, and capture or drive out, the more obvious VC in the hamlet, and prevent VC efforts to return. The Census/Grievance team acts as a group of intelligence specialists who, by individual private interviews (required of all family groups, thus reducing the risk of retaliation for informers) gather data for a census, seek to discover in detail in detail (in conjunction with National Police) the identity of VC, VC-connected families and sympathizers; and learn the felt needs and grievances of the people on a continuing basis to guide the development work and improve local administration.

All cadres will be given an understanding of government pacification policies and the political goals of the struggle, to be passed on to the people (in particular, by the People's Action team). Meanwhile the Civil Affairs elements temporarily take over, if necessary, the village/hamlet administration, or assist existing governments. They urge the people to organize into groups to cooperate on a regular basis; a network of leadership, responsibilities and shared actions should evolve

to tie the hamlet together. Eventually, the team assists in organizing the election of a hamlet chief, administrative committees and villages' councils.

The New Life Development team shows the people the social and economic benefits the government offers, providing materials for self-help projects, organizing economic development projects such as road improvement and markets, bringing in technicians, improved seed and fertilizer, and assisting in providing social services such as schools and clinics.

By all these activities, the cadre are to establish continuing communication between the hamlet/village people and the provincial national government authorities. And they are to guide the people toward a new rural life, one they will feel impelled to defend by their own efforts. Roughly speaking, each step described above is prerequisite to the following ones, and together they lead to the central target of the securing process: the willingness of the local people to participate energetically in their own defense. When this point has been reached, the People's Action Team organizes and trains a people's self defense force, to prepare the people to protect themselves and to resist renewed VC demands for taxes, information, supplies, or recruits, mine-laying labor and silence.

The Rural Construction Cadre Group will stay in a hamlet, living in it day and night, until their fundamental tasks are completed; they might normally spend a year in a single village of three to five hamlets. There is no mechanical set of criteria that can define a hamlet as "pacified" or "secured"

in the desired sense. But there are some benchmarks revelent to the question of when an area is ready to move to the "New Life Development" phase.

In the rough order of their practical accomplishment, these minimum standards are:

1. Area cleared and defended: VC regular, guerrilla and local forces have been annihilated or chased from the area, and military forces are capable of defending the area and destroying any returning enemy units.
2. All people of the area interrogated, the interviews revealing, along with census data, their loyalty, their aspirations and complaints, and their support or criticism of hamlet officials and Communal Administrative Committees.
3. VC political organization identified and destroyed.
4. Self-help and development projects: A number of public health, educational, social and agricultural works have been done to satisfy temporarily immediate requirements of the people and to serve as foundation for development of the new future life.
5. Democratic local government established: hamlet chiefs and Communal People's Committees elected, and trained, qualified Communal Administrative Committees and Hamlet Officials in place.
6. People's self-defense active: the people having willingly organized into anti-Communist self defense groups of various categories and having organized self defense forces and Popular Force units.

Conclusion

This paper has set out the basic goals of the rural construction task. The particular process planned by the GVN and outlined above represents one possible approach to those goals. Whether this approach /will be implemented as planned;

whether the concepts will prove feasible and sound; whether the scale of the effort -- size of forces, length and quality of training, supervisory and control efforts, numbers of cadre groups -- will be adequate for significant progress; all this remains to be seen. Past experience warns that a great deal depends on the understanding and acceptance at all levels of authority of the basic aims and concepts, and particularly on low-level implementation that is faithful to the spirit of the approach. Neither of these is assured at present.

Whether the goals of the "clearing" and "securing" periods, in particular, have been achieved in a fundamental sense can be revealed only in the spirit and behavior of the people and their officials. If the goals have been met -- if military forces, National Police and the Rural Reconstruction Cadre have succeeded in their missions -- the rural people will have come to believe that the GVN does mean to help them achieve a "new rural life," that they are not second-class citizens, that the government truly is, in Prime Minister Ky's words, "determined to do something for the rural areas, the areas which constitute the main and basic part of our nation."² They will have discovered a government that actually seeks out and listens to their needs, desires and grievances, and responds to them; they will feel that they have a part and voice in public affairs. Freed from the threat of large Communist units and the surveillance and coercion of Communist agents within, given the tools of self-defense and encouraged to govern themselves, they will have found a cause worthy of accepting the risks

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of commitment. They will do what is needed to protect their freedom.

SOURCES

1. Prime Minister Ky's address to Armed Forces Congress, January 15, 1966.
2. Prime Minister Ky's statement at Conference of Vietnamese and US Officials, Honolulu Hawaii, February 7, 1966
3. Directive on Rural Reconstruction Policies, Central Rural Reconstruction Committee, Instruction No. 1535, 11 December, 1965.
4. RVNAF Joint General Staff Directive AB 140 December 1965
5. Special Statute on Rural Construction Cadre, Central Executive Committee Decree No. 137, 26 January 1966.
6. Temporary Directions Regarding the Organization and Administration of Rural Construction Cadres, Ministry of Rural Construction, 21 December 1965.

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